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PROJECT  
**CHECO**  
SOUTHEAST ASIA  
**REPORT**  
**AERIAL PROTECTION OF  
MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS  
IN CAMBODIA**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

20080910319

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**C**ontemporary

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**E**xamination of

**C**urrent

**O**perations

**REPORT**

# **AERIAL PROTECTION OF MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS IN CAMBODIA**

**1 OCTOBER 1971**

**HQ PACAF**

**Directorate of Operations Analysis  
CHECO/CORONA HARVEST DIVISION**

Prepared by:

**CAPT WILLIAM A. MITCHELL**

**Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC**

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**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS PACIFIC AIR FORCES  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96553**



**PROJECT CHECO REPORTS**

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. It is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM when used in proper context. The reader must view the study in relation to the events and circumstances at the time of its preparation--recognizing that it was prepared on a contemporary basis which restricted perspective and that the author's research was limited to records available within his local headquarters area.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ernest C. Harbin, Jr.", written over the typed name.

ERNEST C. HARBIN, JR., Major General, USAF  
Chief of Staff

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Chief, CHECO/CORONA HARVEST Division  
Directorate of Operations Analysis  
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### l. AFSDC

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1

### n. AFXO . . . . .

1

|                       |   |
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### a. TAC

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(b) XP. . . . . 1  
(c) DOCC. . . . . 1  
(d) DREA. . . . . 1  
(d) IN. . . . . 1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

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#### (3) WINGS

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(d) 33TFW(DOI). . . . . 1  
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|      |                                      |   |
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A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain William A. Mitchell is an Instructor in Geography at the United States Air Force Academy. He has served one tour in the Republic of Vietnam. Captain Mitchell has done extensive research in the Middle East and has published in the Professional Geographer, Journal of Geography, Middle East Journal, and the Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal.

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## FOREWORD

In early January 1971, the American Embassy in Phnom Penh expressed considerable concern over the critical petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) shortages in the Khmer Republic (Cambodia) which had resulted from successful enemy attacks on commercial shipping vessels sailing the Mekong River inside Cambodia.<sup>1/</sup> These attacks, combined with the closure of land Route 4 from the port city of Kompong Som, led to an agreement among the United States, the Khmer Republic and the Republic of Vietnam for protection of Mekong River convoys from Tan Chau, Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.<sup>2/</sup>

This report reviews significant events leading up to the Combined Convoy Security Plan and examines protective air coverage provided by the Cambodian, RVN, and U.S. forces from January to September 1971.

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## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND

The Combined Convoy Security Plan for Mekong River security was devised in response to an increasing number of effective enemy attacks on merchant shipping on the Mekong between the Cambodian-Republic of Vietnam border and Phnom Penh. In response to these attacks, the Government of the Khmer Republic (GKR) established a military command entitled Zone Special Mekong (ZSM) for insuring security along the Cambodian portion of the Mekong River.<sup>3/</sup> Concern over the grave situation was expressed on 7 January 1971 by the American Embassy in Phnom Penh to the Secretary of State in Washington.<sup>4/</sup> The U.S. Embassy was specifically concerned about the fact that from 26 November 1970 through 6 January 1971, there were eight attacks on civilian petroleum, oil, and lubricant tankers transiting the Mekong between Phnom Penh and the Cambodian-RVN border. The Viet Cong success on the Mekong threatened to seal off the vital input of POL and military cargo into Cambodia.<sup>5/</sup>

POL supplies reached a critical point on 7 January 1971. (See Figure 1.) With only a few days reserve of most POL products, immediate replenishment was paramount.<sup>6/</sup> Under these conditions, to ensure that the Mekong River shipping channel remained open for POL and military cargo, and to prevent isolation of Phnom Penh and large parts of Cambodia, the Combined Mekong Convoy Security Plan was implemented on 12 January 1971. Basically, the plan called for air and surface protection to military and commercial

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convoys proceeding from Tan Chau, RVN to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, along the Mekong River.

TRAN HUNG DAO XVIII was the code name selected by the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) to represent the combined naval operation of both VNN and the Khmer Republic. The plan permitted tankers, barges, and merchant ships to assemble at Tan Chau and form into convoys which sailed under the command of the Vietnamese Convoy Operations Commander (COC). The COC was responsible for coordinating river, air, and bank defenses. <sup>7/</sup>

#### Composition of Surface Security Forces

The composition of surface security forces for Mekong River convoys varied with the convoy size. For a representative convoy of 10 ships, the VNN vessels were divided into three groups: Advance, Escort, and Reaction. The Advance group composition included: four Mechanized Landing Craft (LCM) which were modified for use as minesweepers; two River Patrol Boats (PBR) for escorting the Advance group; one Command and Control Boat (CCB) for the COC; one monitor boat (LCM converted into a gunship) for heavy firepower; and three Amphibious Assault Patrol Boats (ASPB). These 11 VNN vessels were used to provide a minesweeping capability and a blocking unit. The blocking unit moved ahead of the commercial convoy and faced the banks at likely ambush points. After the convoy had passed, they again moved ahead to assume another blocking or flanking position.

The Escort group consisted of one Large Landing Support Ship (LSSL) used as the convoy flagship and four Fast Patrol Craft (PCF) for speed

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POL SUPPLIES IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA ON 7 JANUARY 1971

| <u>TYPE</u>   | <u>DAYS OF SUPPLIES ON HAND</u> |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| MOGAS         | 10                              |
| Kerosene      | 0                               |
| JP-1          | 3                               |
| JP-4          | 31                              |
| AVGAS 100/130 | 3                               |
| AVGAS 115/145 | 30                              |
| Gasoil        | 21                              |
| Diesel        | 5                               |
| Fuel Oil      | 0                               |

SOURCE: (S) Message, American Embassy, Phnom Penh, to Secretary of State, 071310Z Jan 71, Subj: Mekong Access (U).

FIGURE 1

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and maneuverability. Additionally, there were two PBRs assigned to each commercial vessel in the convoy. Thus, for a convoy of 10 ships, 20 PBRs would provide escort protection.

The Reaction group was composed of one CCB for the Deputy COC, two ASPBs, and five Armored Troop Carriers (ATC). These vessels carried the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and Forces Armees Nationale Khmer (FANK) ground units which could be placed along the banks if needed. In addition to these reaction units, the ARVN units secured the river banks from Tan Chau to Neak Luong while the FANK units monitored the banks from Neak Luong to Phnom Penh.<sup>8/</sup>

A summation of VNN vessels involved in the above example illustrate that 46 vessels were used to ensure that 10 merchant vessels safely sailed the Mekong River.

The Mekong River convoy designation procedures were a modification of those used in WW I and WW II. Commercial convoys between Tan Chau and Phnom Penh were designated TP-1, TP-2, etc., while the return convoy from Phnom Penh to Tan Chau simply had the letters reversed.<sup>9/</sup>

#### Air Support

As originally conceived, air support was to be provided by the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and United States Armed Forces. USAF and U.S. Army assets were specifically included, but in the basic plan no references were made to U.S. Navy air assets. The Seventh Air Force (7AF) was tasked

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with providing continuous air coverage for all convoys from the Cambodian--  
Republic of Vietnam border to Phnom Penh. The 7AF's role of providing  
continuous air coverage began on 17 January 1971.

In actuality, the Cambodians provided no air support while the RVN  
contributed occasionally. It was possible that this role would change  
in the last month of 1971 or in early 1972. The concluding chapter dis-  
cusses future trends for the Mekong River air coverage.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOY ROUTE

The enemy, with relatively free movement throughout the area, was within rocket and recoilless rifle range of all river traffic along the approximately 70 miles of meandering river between Tan Chau and Phnom Penh.<sup>10/</sup> Width along this portion of the river varies from 2,000 to 400 meters--depending on the season--and permits access for ships from 6,000 to 4,000 tons, accordingly. The Mekong River flow begins decreasing in November and reaches its lowest level in May. Terrain along the river is flat to gently rolling and is covered by light vegetation in most places. Primarily due to the lack of drainage, there are many swamps along the river. Extensive rice fields were the predominant landscape feature. (See Figure 2.)

In early January 1971, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was advised that the Mekong River could be blocked along several areas in the river, probably with the wreck of a single vessel.<sup>11/</sup> Evidently operating with this same knowledge, the enemy chose for ambushes those narrow choke points previously identified by the DIA. (See Figure 3.)

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**GENERAL LOCATION MAP OF MEKONG CONVOYS  
FROM TAN CHAU TO PHNOM PENH**

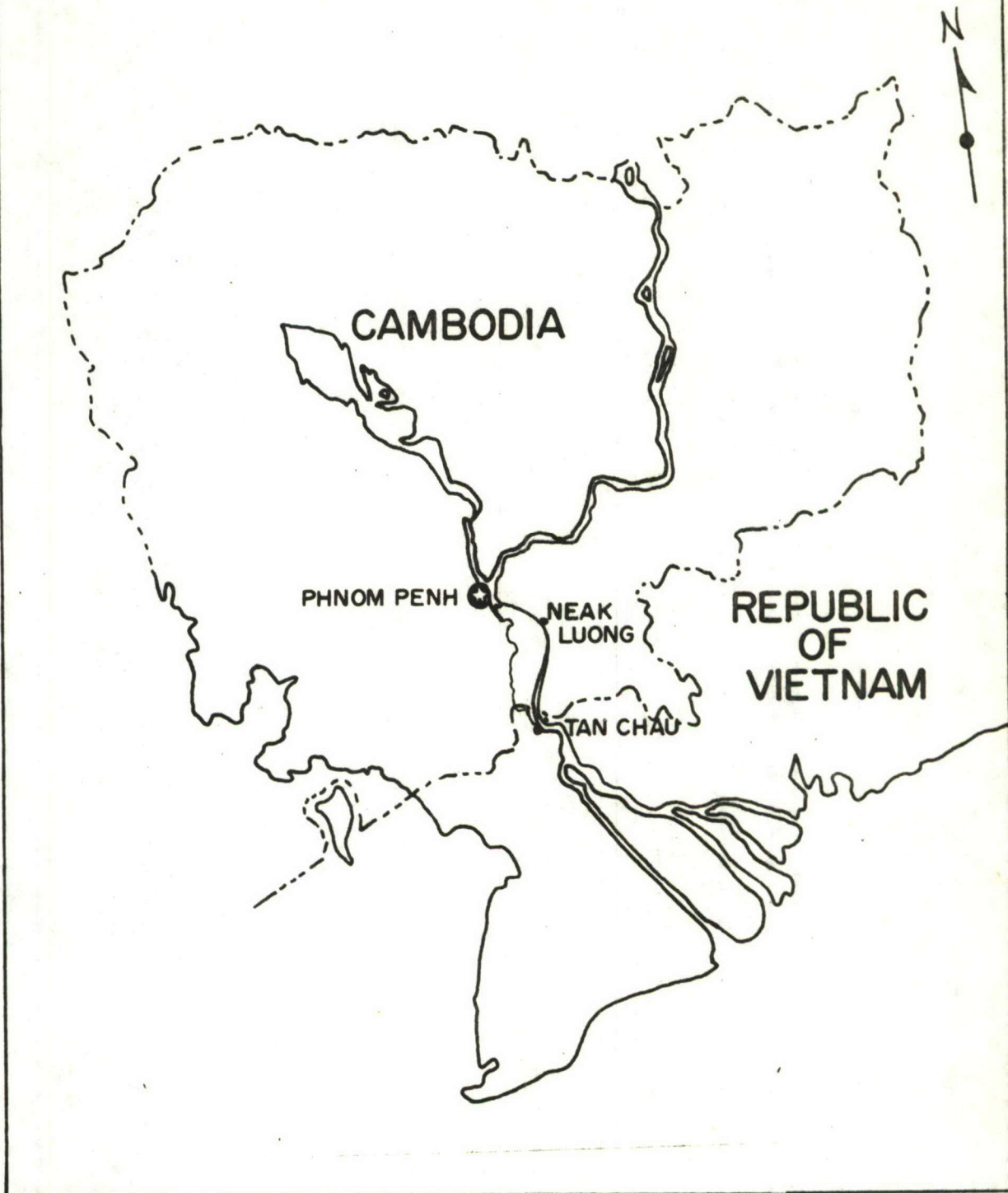


FIGURE 2

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# **CONVOY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG: TAN CHAU TO PHNOM PENH**

PHNOM  
PENH

## **ATTACKS**

1. 17 JAN 71
2. 17 JAN 71
3. 18 JAN 71
4. 19 JAN 71
5. 23 JAN 71
6. 23 JAN 71
7. 23 JAN 71
8. 25 JAN 71
9. 26 JAN 71
10. 29 JAN 71
11. 30 JAN 71
12. 10 FEB 71
13. 10 FEB 71
14. 10 FEB 71
15. 22 FEB 71
16. 22 FEB 71
17. 16 MAR 71
18. 17 MAR 71
19. 31 MAR 71
20. 29 APR 71
21. 17 MAY 71
22. 17 JUN 71
23. 24 JUN 71
24. 23 JUL 71
25. 13 AUG 71
26. 22 AUG 71
27. 3 SEP 71
28. 12 SEP 71
29. 24 SEP 71

NEAK LUONG

10 MILES (APPROX)

CAMBODIA  
SOUTH VIETNAM

TAN CHAU

Figure 3



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### CHAPTER III

#### ORGANIZATION OF AIR SUPPORT

The Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), tasked the Seventh Air Force to arrange for continuous air coverage for convoys on the Mekong River from the Cambodian border to Phnom Penh, employing air assets as available and specifically directed the use of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and 7AF tactical air forces. In addition, U.S. Army rotary wing aircraft were also obligated for river coverage.<sup>12/</sup> Because of nonavailability of Khmer air assets, their contribution to the convoy security was primarily in ground operations. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) contribution will be discussed later.

#### USAF, USA, and USN Coverage

Under the above guidelines, 7AF established that USAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) OV-10s and O-2As would provide continuous day and night coverage, respectively. Further, 7AF assets would be used to provide AC-119Gs for continuous day and night coverage.<sup>13/</sup> The U.S. Army assets tasked by 7AF for continuous day coverage were one Light Fire Team (LFT), normally consisting of one UH-1H Command and Communications helicopter (C&C); two OH-6A Light Observation helicopters (LOH-Scout); and two AH-1Gs (Cobra). An Army C&C was also assigned for continuous night coverage. Three LFTs were required to ensure that one was on continuous coverage.

In the formative stages of determining the most economical combination of aircraft for adequate coverage, several mixes of aircraft were tried.<sup>14/</sup>

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A team consisting of one USAF FAC and one gunship was tried first, then a more effective combination of several U.S. Army and USAF aircraft was introduced. The combination discussed in the preceding paragraph proved to be the most effective combination of air coverage and was used for the majority of convoys.

It is now appropriate to discuss the evolution of the U.S. Navy's role in air coverage. In February 1971, the U.S. Navy was requested to provide UH-1 helicopters (Sea Wolves) for night alert. Thus, the initial coverage included an active role for the USAF and U.S. Army while the U.S. Navy air assets were on standby alert.

Only three days after the Combined Convoy Security Plan was directed by COMUSMACV, the U.S. Navy requested an active role in providing air coverage when USAF and VNAF assets were not available.<sup>15/</sup> Seventh Air Force claimed sufficient air assets were available and declined the assistance of the Navy.<sup>16/</sup>

Approximately three weeks later, 7AF air resources were being severely strained because of its assigned task to also provide air cover for all road convoys in Cambodia. This necessitated a request to COMUSMACV on 9 February 1971 for U.S. Navy rotary and fixed wing tactical air support for the Mekong convoy coverage.<sup>17/</sup> Approval for employment of U.S. Navy rotary wing (UH-1B) and heavily armed fixed wing light attack aircraft (OV-10 Black Pony) in support of the convoys was received on 28 February 1971.<sup>18/</sup>

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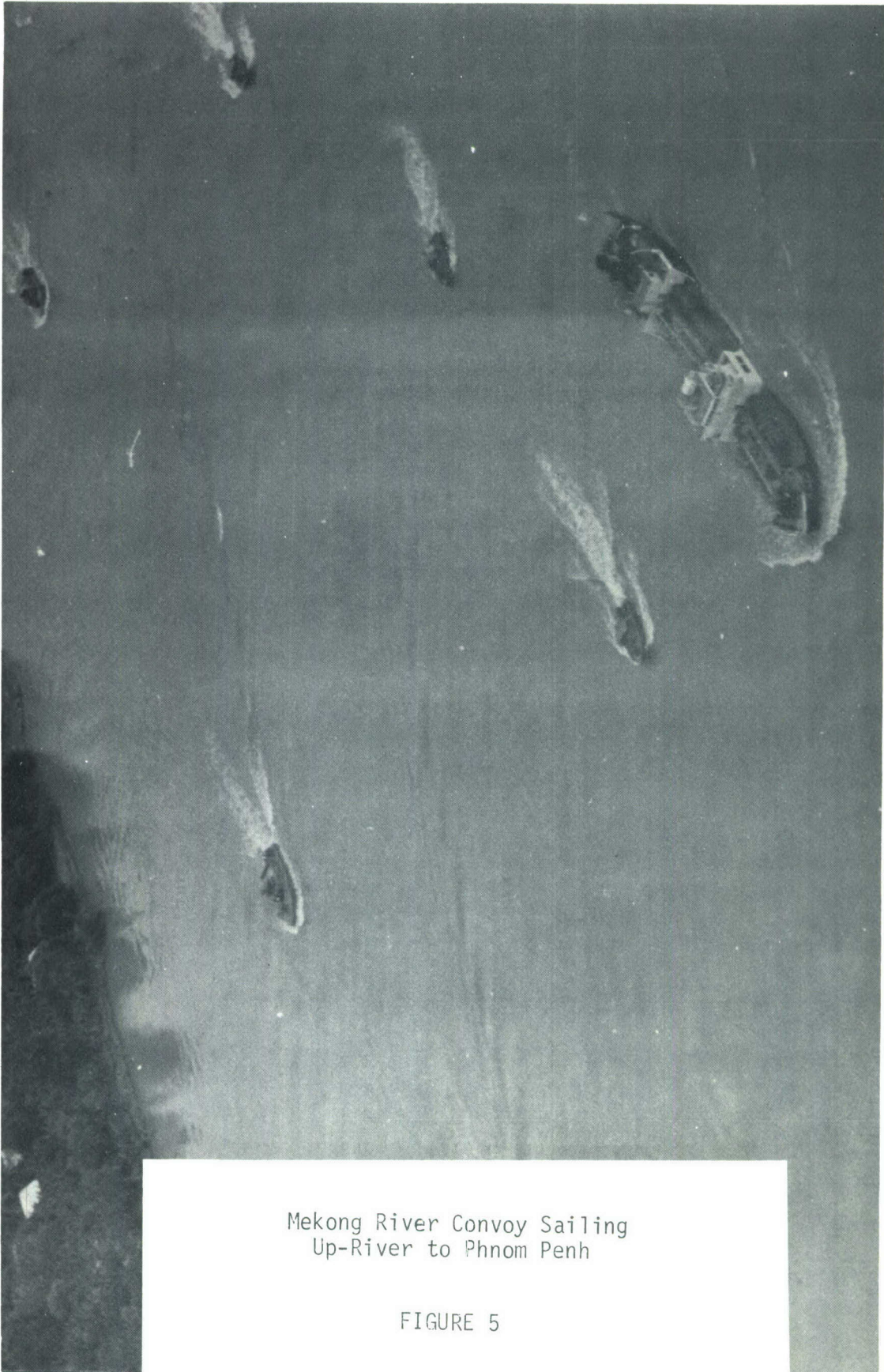


Mekong River Convoy  
with Vietnamese Navy Escort

FIGURE 4

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Mekong River Convoy Sailing  
Up-River to Phnom Penh

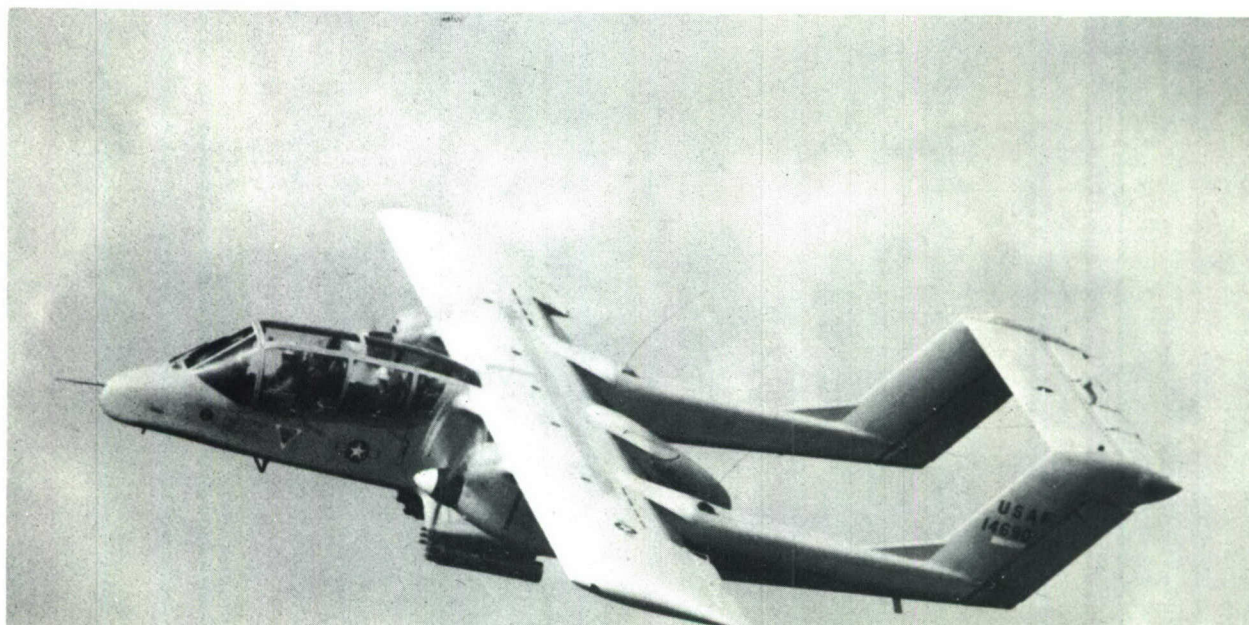
FIGURE 5



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USAF O2  
FIGURE 6



USAF FACs Provided Continuous Air Coverage  
FIGURE 7

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**UNCLASSIFIED**



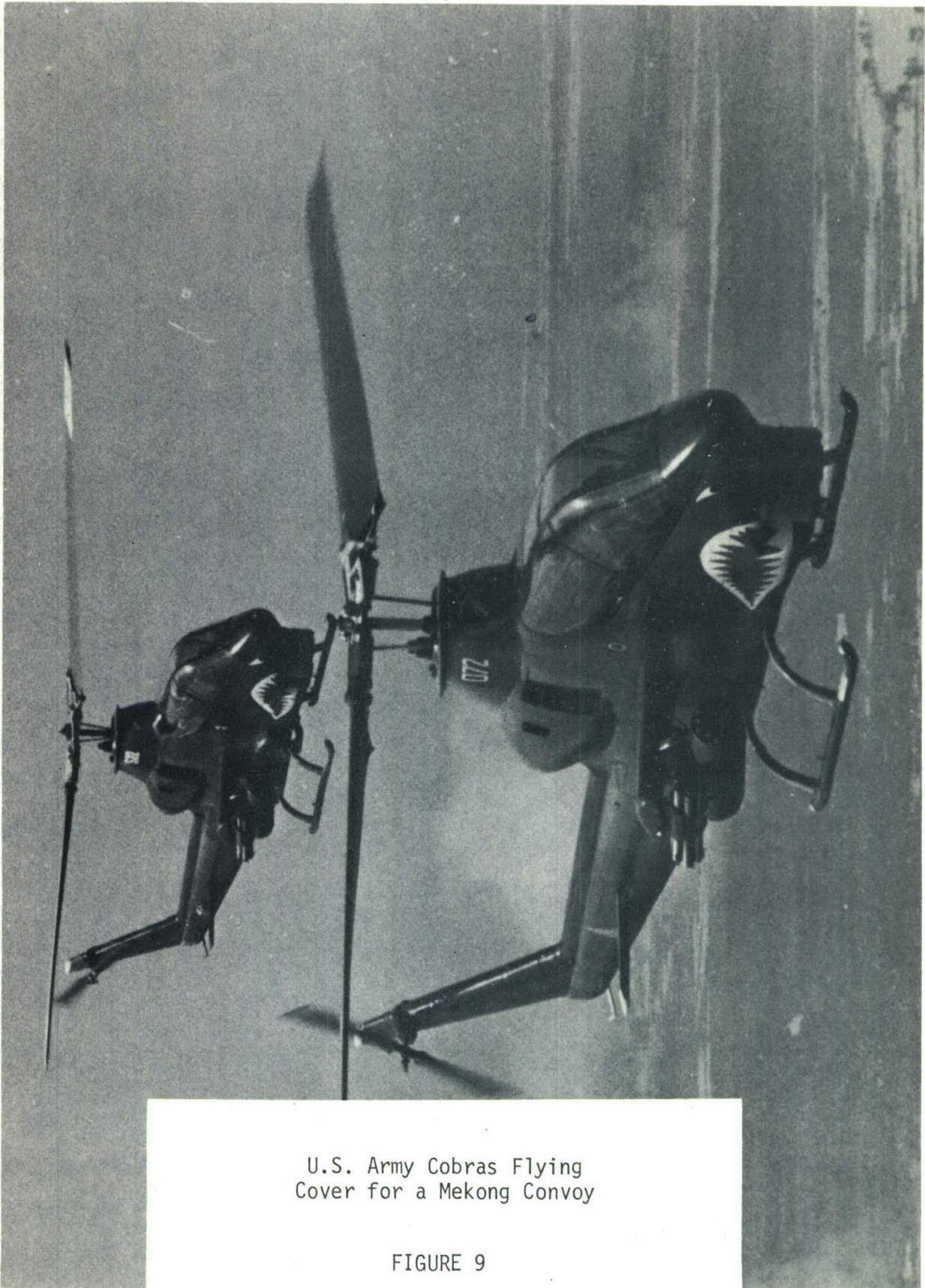
USAF C-119G over Tributary of the Mekong River

FIGURE 8

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U.S. Army Cobras Flying  
Cover for a Mekong Convoy

FIGURE 9

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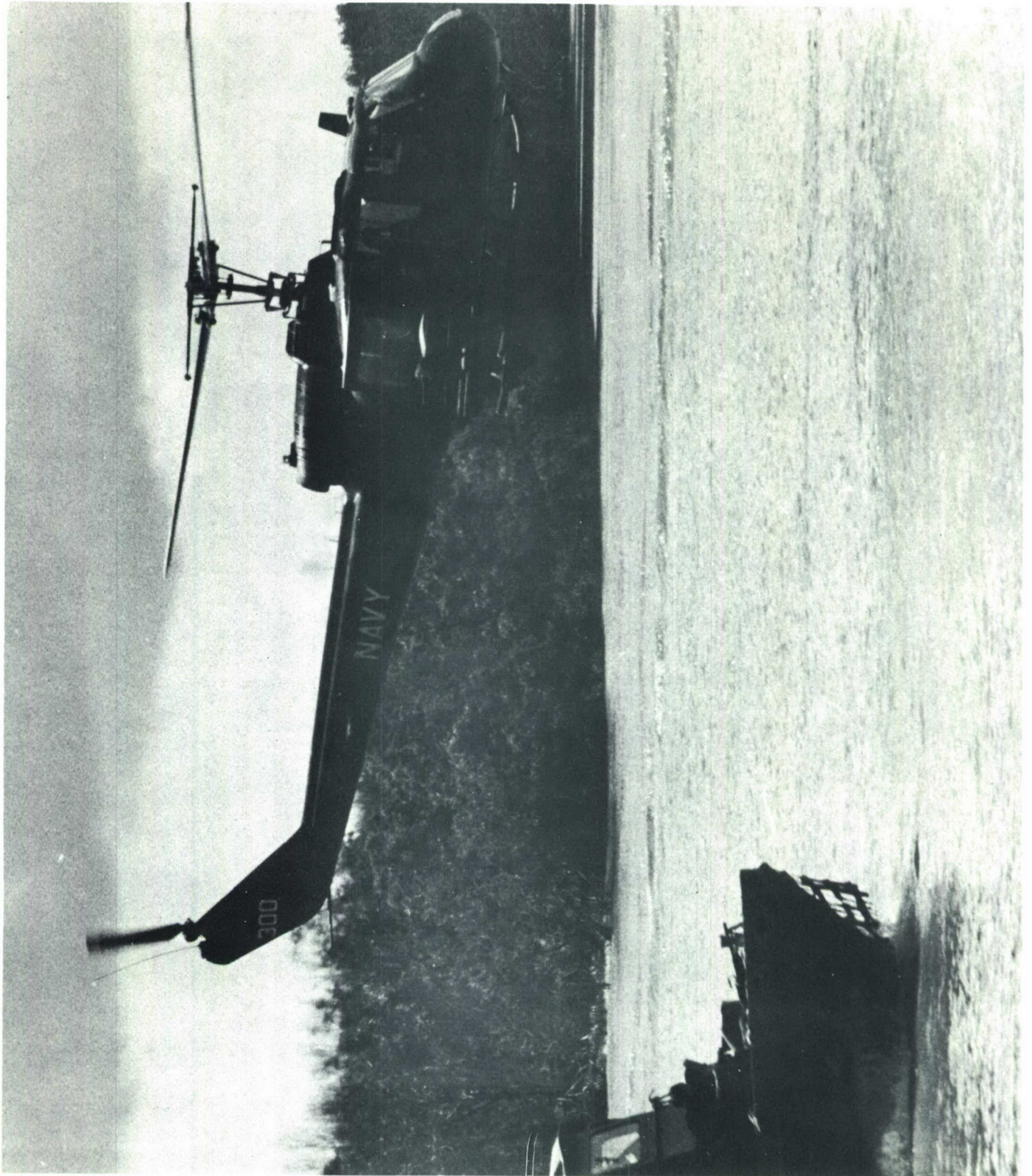
US Army LOHs flying along the river  
bank covering for a Mekong convoy

FIGURE 10

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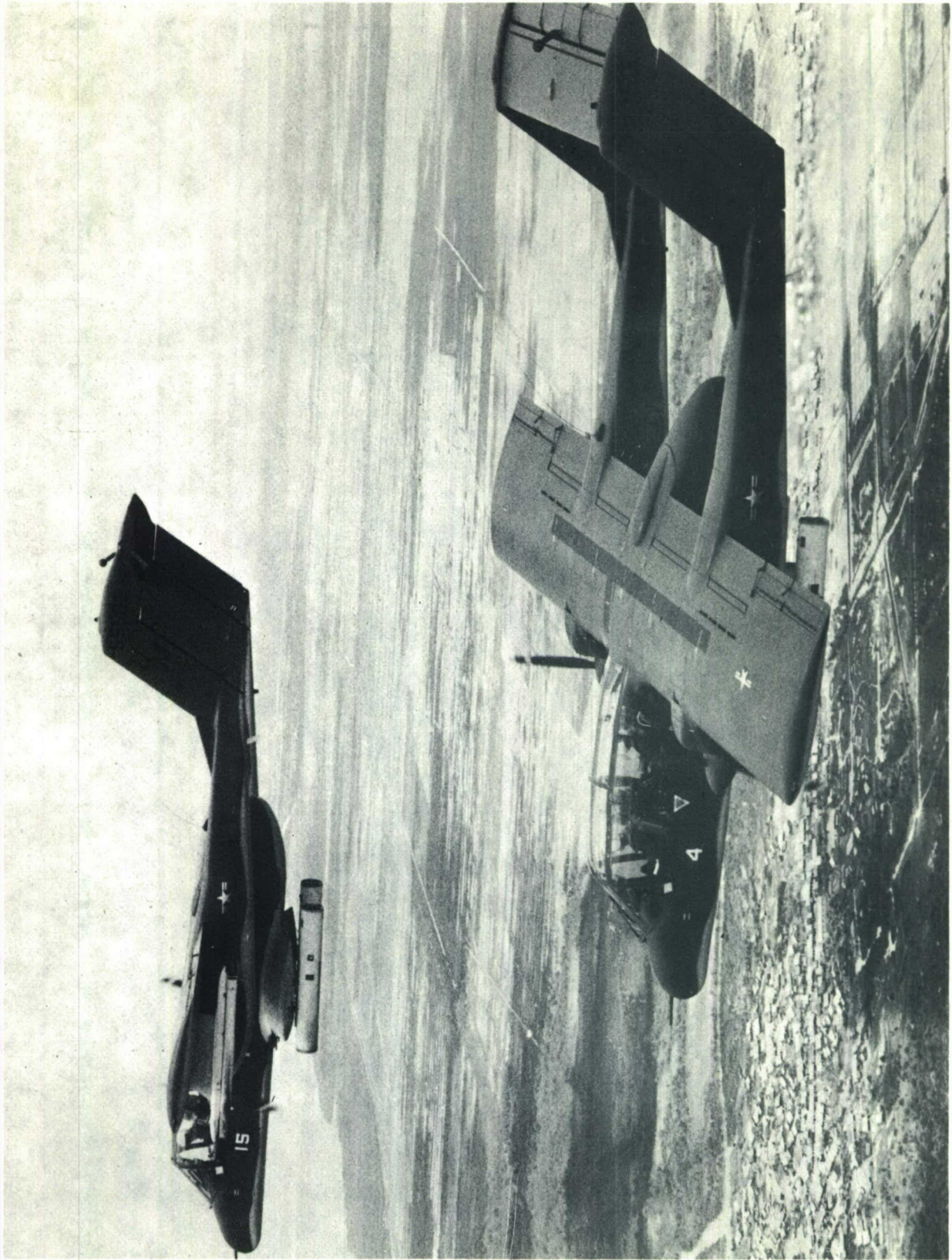
U.S. Navy Sea Wolf on the Mekong River

FIGURE 11

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U.S. Navy Black Pony over the Mekong Delta

FIGURE 12

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### Centralized Control of Air Assets

Centralized control of air coverage for Mekong River convoys was provided by 7AF Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations. The Special Operations Division (DOXS) and Fighter Division (DOXF) received air coverage requests approximately 48 to 24 hours in advance of convoy movements, in messages from the Combined Task Force 218 (CTF 218). Fragmentary (frag) orders were then issued by DOXS directing air support assignments for U.S. Army LFTs and USAF gunships. USAF FACs were notified about pending convoys by CTF 218; however, DOXF accomplished their frag orders. Similarly, the VNAF assets were identified by VNAF frag orders which were later coordinated with DOXS. Support for unannounced convoys was to be diverted from 7AF air assets which had been originally fragged to Cambodia.<sup>19/</sup>

### Rules of Engagement

In January 1971, the rules of engagement permitted gunships, FACs or fighter aircraft controlled by FACs to return fire for the purpose of protecting convoys. Initially, when the convoy was under attack, air to ground fire was approved by the surface commander (COC) and FANK liaison officer (both were aboard the COC command ship) without specific approval of the 7AF Tactical Air Control Center.<sup>20/</sup> In cases where no radio communications between aircraft and the COC was possible, gunships and FACs were permitted to expend to break contact; however, the origin of fire must have been unquestionably pinpointed. Subsequently, the authority to validate targets for air strikes was withdrawn from the FANK liaison officer and COC. This authority was then vested in the FANK liaison officer aboard an airborne

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tactical air control center and in the TACC at 7AF.<sup>21/</sup>

Even further control was established on 27 March 1971. As a result of increased friendly ground forces along the banks of the Mekong, the entire route from Tan Chau to Phnom Penh was declared a "no-fire" zone. No air to ground firing was allowed unless it was cleared by TACC.<sup>22/</sup>

As expected, the enemy took advantage of the allied "no-fire" zone provisions. For example, on Convoy TP-17, B-40 launchers seemed to be in three groups of two each, along and within the settlements on the river banks. U.S. Navy Sea Wolves observed the second and third attacks from directly overhead and claimed to have the source of fire pinpointed. They claimed to be in a position to accurately return the fire, but the Air Mission Commander in the C&C helicopter could not recommend clearance because the Cambodian Liaison Officer in the C&C could not accurately determine where the civilians were. Thus, the FAC and Light Fire Teams were not used. It is interesting to note that an ARVN company commander was in the area 30 minutes prior to the attack and had announced the area was "all quiet."<sup>23/</sup>

#### Transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF

A possible void in air coverage was suggested by the 7AF on 18 August 1971.<sup>24/</sup> The Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations, 7AF, was concerned over the transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF scheduled for 10 September and suggested that the U.S. Navy Sea Wolves would be needed for a more active role. The Sea Wolves had been participating from an alert posture, while the Black

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Ponies were seldom tasked. The question was whether the VNAF would be able to provide gunship coverage, during the transition, although they had signed a letter of agreement to provide one AC-47 from Binh Thuy for three hours of night coverage.<sup>25/</sup>

To prevent any possible void in air coverage, COMUSMACV directed on 28 August 1971 that U.S. Navy OV-10s would be fragged and placed on alert for immediate scramble.<sup>26/</sup> In the same directive, an additional five USAF aircrews were provided to ensure that five VNAF AC-119G sorties were flown daily (five in Cambodia--three of these were tasked in support of the convoys) until the VNAF capability was adequate to assume continuous night coverage.

The VNAF representatives on the Mekong River Tripartite Study Group had stated their desire to provide AC-119 and AC-47 convoy coverage. Since their desires were verbal, COMUSMACV directed that a continuing effort be made to finalize the agreements.<sup>27/</sup>

#### Command, Control, and Tactics

To illustrate the complexity and intricacy of actually expending air assets in support of Mekong convoys, it is best to look at a hypothetical example. One should realize that there were numerous variables affecting air coverage, and the following explanation could have been modified depending on severity of attack, location of the enemy, etc.

When a convoy came under attack, the COC may have requested air support to suppress the enemy fire. If so, the COC contacted the C&C

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which, in turn, relayed the request to the FAC or Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC). The FAC or ABCCC contacted the TACC and requested clearance to fire.

Upon receiving the request for permission to expend, TACC carefully reviewed the attack area for cultural centers, populated settlements, etc. If it appeared to be a clear area, the TACC contacted the 7AF FANK Liaison Officer who either granted or denied permission to expend. The senior duty officer in TACC then made the final decision.

Once TACC approval was granted (assuming the FANK Liaison had agreed to expend), the FAC or ABCCC was contacted by TACC and granted clearance to expend. The FAC or ABCCC then relayed the clearance to the C&C. If the C&C still desired to expend, it directed the FANK and ARVN ground units to identify their unit locations.

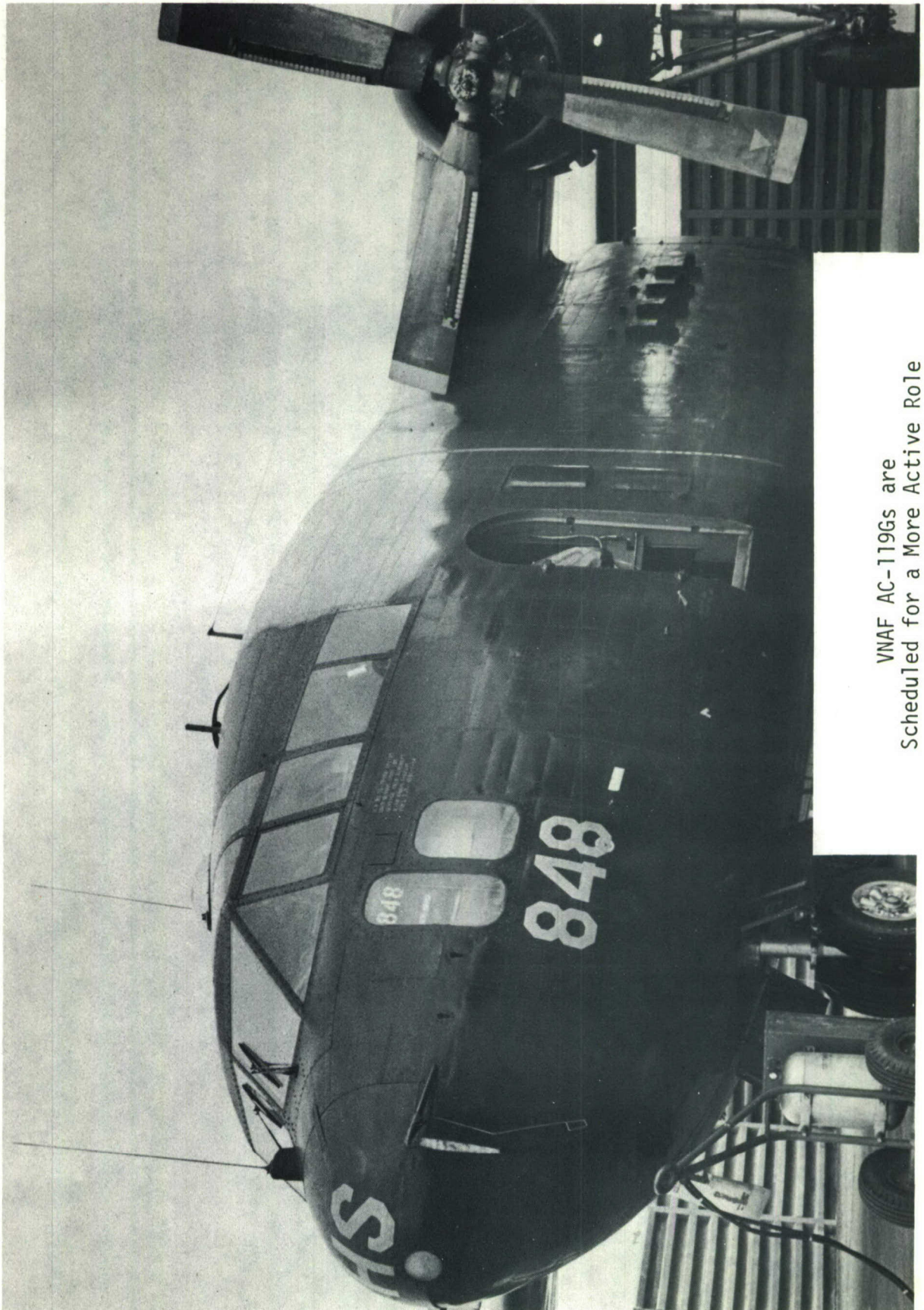
At the first sign of enemy fire, the LOHs had cleared the area. The C&C flew off to about 1000 meters and circled the "hot" area. The lead Cobra attacked and pulled off about 900 to 1,200 feet above the target. The "cover" Cobra followed closely behind, expended, and pulled up about 1,500 to 2,000 feet above the target.

The FAC and C&C observed and monitored the entire operation. If more firepower was needed, the AC-119G, Sea Wolf or Black Pony were used. FACs directed and monitored the additional tactical assets, in addition to marking targets.

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VNAF AC-119Gs are  
Scheduled for a More Active Role

FIGURE 13

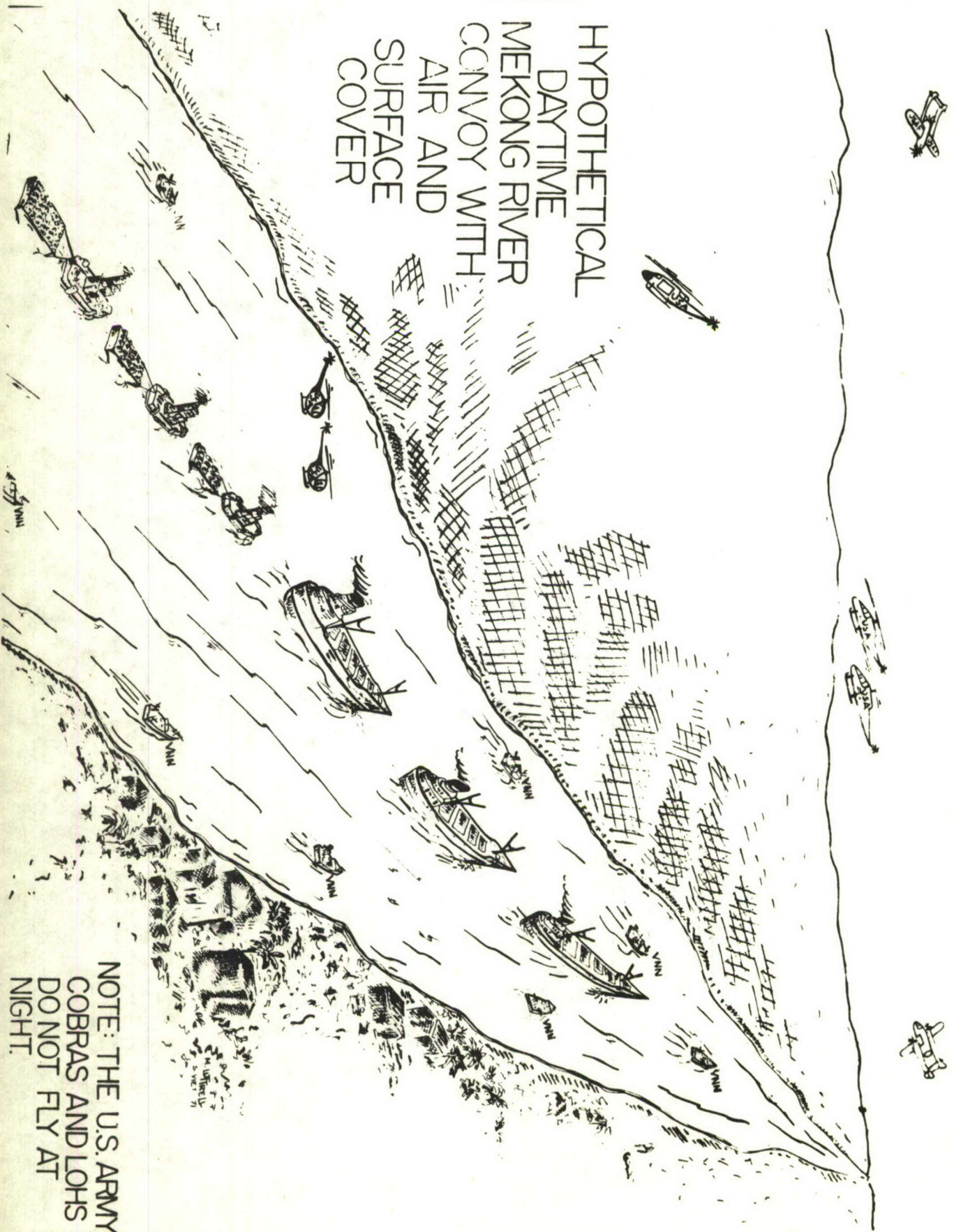
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FIGURE 14

HYPOTHETICAL  
DAYTIME  
MEKONG RIVER  
CONVOY WITH  
AIR AND  
SURFACE  
COVER



NOTE: THE U.S. ARMY  
COBRAS AND LOHS  
DO NOT FLY AT  
NIGHT.

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USAF AC-119Gs, flying at an elevation of approximately 3,500 feet, circled over the convoys in a large elliptical orbit, day and night, for the duration of the transit. Their heavy fire capability provided by the 7.62mm mini-guns, combined with their extended fuel range of six and one-half hours, made them ideally suited for convoy escorting.

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## CHAPTER IV

### EFFECTIVENESS OF AIR COVERAGE FOR MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS

The original objective of the Mekong River convoy operation was to ensure that POL and military cargo vessels continued transporting critically required supplies into Phnom Penh. Surface arteries, including both rail lines and roads, were not sufficiently secured. Route 4 remained only marginally open and even when open its contribution was minimal since each Mekong River convoy consistently carried 10 times as much POL as a regular 30 truck convoy.<sup>28/</sup> Nevertheless, air support was occasionally requested for road convoys. Air support for rail and road convoys is explained in a CHECO report covering Air Operations in Cambodia.<sup>29/</sup> Requests were infrequent.

POL consumption in Phnom Penh was approximately 20,000 tons per month prior to the closing of Route 4. By February 1971, consumption had dropped to 5,000 tons.<sup>30/</sup> With the uninterrupted arrival of Mekong River convoys, by July 1971, approximately 25,000 tons of POL products were shipped into the capital city each month.<sup>31/</sup>

#### An Analysis of Effectiveness

The effectiveness of air coverage for the Mekong River convoys can not be quantitatively measured with available data, but a perusal of Appendix I reveals significant data for an overall summary. At the end of September 1971, 32 convoys had attempted the round trip from Tan Chau to Phnom Penh. This exposed approximately 640 vessels (commercial tankers,

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tugs, and barges) to enemy fire, since each convoy averaged a minimum of 10 commercial vessels. Even though there were 29 separate enemy attacks on the convoys, and 21 ships received some degree of damage, only four vessels were moderately to heavily damaged. Only convoy TP-12 was significantly delayed by enemy action, but it reached its destination--without damage--16 hours late. The convoy was halted while air strikes cleared an ambush point.

Complete data for identifying air strikes in direct support of all convoys is not available, but records do reveal that U.S. Army gunships expended 14 times on the enemy; USAF gunships expended a minimum of seven times; and Navy Sea Wolves and/or Black Ponies expended two times.<sup>32/</sup>

Convoys gradually expanded, and on 5 July TP-25 carried an unprecedented 2 1/2 million gallons of POL. This particular convoy consisted of 17 vessels, including tugs, barges, and tankers.<sup>33/</sup>

Obviously, continuous air coverage required a large number of sorties. For example, TP/PT-27 against which no enemy action was initiated, required 71 sorties to be flown.<sup>34/</sup> As of 2 August 1971, 76 sorties were required for each convoy with an average sailing time of 26 hours.<sup>35/</sup>

Success of the first mission was recognized on 18 January 1971, when Vice Admiral King, Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam, sent the following message to 7AF and others praising the contribution of air coverage.<sup>36/</sup>

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*Yesterday's successful Mekong River convoy (TP-1, 17 January) operation provides ample evidence of benefits attainable from interservice and allied cooperation, and will provide an example of future such operations. The air coverage provided the convoy left nothing to be desired. Please extend my congratulations to all concerned.*

A few months later, on 24 April, Commodore Phu, VNN Convoy Operations Commander, continued to praise the air coverage, particularly with his comment that no major attacks had been attempted since approximately 1 April. He attributed this to the high degree of cooperation and planning between the U.S. and Vietnamese forces.<sup>37/</sup>

The most recent recognition of air coverage to the success of the Mekong River convoys was on 18 August when the Tripartite Deputies Group acknowledged that "air coverage had been a key factor in the security of convoy operations."<sup>38/</sup>

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## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The Mekong River convoy operation originated as a short term program to ensure the continuing arrival of POL and general supplies into the Khmer capital city. It was extended for two more months as of 1 May 1971.<sup>39/</sup> On 24 June 1971, the Chief, Vietnamese Joint General Staff, issued instructions to again extend the convoy coverage until 31 August 1971.<sup>40/</sup> A meeting of the Tripartite Deputies Study Group met again on 16 August 1971 and agreed to continue coverage until 1 November 1971.<sup>41/</sup> In all probability, commitments then existing would extend well into 1972.

A primary objective was the turn-over of operational control of Mekong River convoys to the Khmer Republic's navy at the earliest date.<sup>42/</sup> The Government of the Khmer Republic (GKR) voiced its intentions of assuming command of all Mekong River operations effective 1 September 1971.<sup>43/</sup> Intelligence estimates had predicted that elements of the 96th NVA, 211th Viet Cong Artillery Regiment, and the 88th NVA Regiment would continue to operate in the Mekong area probably for the purpose of disrupting friendly shipping. This high threat to shipping coupled with the inability to perform air support coordination functions--which had been a critical factor in successful convoy operations--required COMUSMACV on 22 August 1971 to advise the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) that FANK was not capable of providing adequate security to Mekong River convoys at that time.<sup>44/</sup> The Tripartite Deputies Study Group on 16 August 1971 also recommended deferral of Khmer assumption of the Mekong River convoy security.<sup>45/</sup>

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Reduction in U.S. air assets, particularly with the transfer of AC-119Gs to the VNAF on 10 September 1971, required a more active role by the VNAF and Khmer Air Force. The basic change was the transfer of AC-119Gs night coverage to the VNAF (VNAF AC-47s were occasionally available for gunship coverage, but documentation on sorties flown in direct support of the Mekong operation was not available). The Khmer Air Force FACs and Khmer tactical fighters were expected at some future date to provide air coverage.<sup>46/</sup> Plans called for the Khmer Air Force to assume night coverage when they reach their full complement of eight AC-47s for FY 1972, scheduled for June 1972. The Khmer AC-47 force is scheduled to grow to 11 in FY 1973 and reach its maximum of 12 aircraft in FY 1974.<sup>47/</sup>

The Combined Convoy Security Plan had tested USAF ability to overcome complex communications and coordination problems. Through "trial and error," a sophisticated communications system between the FANK, ARVN, VNAF, and U.S. Forces had become operationally effective.

Considering the critical shortage of POL in Phnom Penh when the air coverage began, and the fact that only one tug and one barge were destroyed out of the approximately 640 commercial vessels that attempted the round trip to and from Phnom Penh, there can be no doubt that the mission was successfully accomplished. To insure the success of the mission, over 2,240 sorties were flown in direct support of the convoys. Out of this number, strike aircraft expended 23 times.

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# APPENDIX I

## DATA ON ENEMY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 1971

| CONVOY | DATE    | TIME           | LOCATION  | TYPE                          | RESULTS                      | CASUALTIES   | AIR COVER  |
|--------|---------|----------------|---|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--|
| TP-1   | 17Jan71 | 0945H<br>1400H | WT255290<br>Ten miles<br>north of<br>Neak Luong<br>14 miles<br>SEast of<br>Phnom Penh | B41, 75mm<br>BH, 75mm         | No damage<br>No damage       | None<br>None | Army gunships expended<br>Army gunships expended |
|        | 18Jan71 | 0310H          |   | 75mm, small<br>arms           | minor damage                 | None         |  |
| TP-2   | 19Jan71 | 1500H          | WT210650  | B-40, 75mm                    | No hits                      | None         |  |
| TP-3   | 23Jan71 | 1715H          | 11 miles N<br>of Neak Luong   | B40                           | No damage                    | None         |  |
|        |         | 1945H          | 11 miles SE<br>of Phnom Penh  | B40                           | No damage                    | None         |  |
|        |         | 1955H          | 11 miles SE<br>of Phnom Penh  | B40                           | Minor damage                 | None         |  |
| PT-3   | 25Jan71 | 0900H          | 10 miles<br>from Phnom<br>Penh  | B40, auto-<br>matic rifles    | No damage                    | None         |  |
| TP-4   | 26Jan71 | 1615H          | WT275330  | Command-<br>detonated<br>mine | No damage                    | None         | Not required                                     |
| TP-5   | 29Jan71 | 1915H          | 10 miles<br>N of Neak<br>Luong  | 57mm R/R<br>B40               | Tug aground<br>but recovered | None         |  |

Note 1. Data for Air Cover was gathered from Weekly Intelligence Summaries, NAVFORV Monthly Intelligence Summaries and Official Logs maintained by DOXR and MACV/NAVFORV Liaison. Air coverage by FACs was available on all convoys; this column defines only those assets which definitely expended.

# APPENDIX I (Continued)

## DATA ON ENEMY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 1971

| CONVOY      | DATE    | TIME        | LOCATION  | TYPE                                  | RESULTS   | CASUALTIES  | AIR COVER  |
|-------------|---------|-------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| TP-5        | 30Jan71 | 2020H       | WT052751  | 50 cal, 75mm<br>RPG-7                 | 2 merchants<br>and 1 tug hit                                  | Unknown   |  |
| TP-6        | 10Feb71 | 0615H       | WT260330  | 75mm                                  | No damage   | None  | USAF gunships and Army<br>LFT expended                 |
|             |         | 1300H       | WT120720  | 75mm                                  | No damage   | None  | USAF gunships and Army<br>LFT expended                 |
|             |         | 1545H       |   | 75mm, B40                             | 1 tug hit   | None  | USAF gunships and Army<br>LFT expended                 |
| TP-7        | 22Feb71 | 1040H       | 25 miles SE B40, 75mm<br>of Phnom Penh small arms |                                       | 6 hits, minor<br>damage                                       | None  | Army LFT expended                                      |
|             |         | 1400H       | 82 miles SE B40, 75mm<br>of Phnom Penh            |                                       | Tug heavily<br>damaged, ammo<br>barge sunk, 1<br>barge burned | 4 civ wounded<br>Army LFT and USAF<br>gunships expended |  |
| TP-8<br>& 9 |         | No incident |   |                                       |   |   |  |
| TP-10       | 16Mar71 | 0635H       | 9 miles S<br>of Neak Luong                        | Mine explosion                        | Tug heavily<br>damaged  | None  |  |
| PT-10       | 17Mar71 | 1945H       | 9 miles N<br>of RVN border                        | B40                                   | Tug tow-line<br>severed                                       | 1 killed<br>1 injured                                   | USAF gunships expended                                 |
| TP-11       |         | No incident |   |                                       |   |   |  |
| TP-12       | 31Mar71 |             | 8 miles S<br>of Neak<br>Luong                     | Stalled 16<br>hours for<br>air attack | No damage   | 1 American<br>KIA                                       | USAF and Army LFT<br>expended--two LOHs<br>were downed |



# APPENDIX I (Continued)

## DATA ON ENEMY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 1971

| CONVOY | DATE   | TIME         | LOCATION                  | TYPE                  | RESULTS                     | CASUALTIES         | AIR COVER  |
|--------|--|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|--|
| TP-13  | The RVN preferred that this number not be used to designate a convoy |              |                           |                       |                             |                    |  |
| TP-14  | through 16   | No incident  |                           |                       |                             |                    |  |
| TP-17  | 29Apr71  | 0322H        | Ten miles inside Cambodia | B40, automatic rifles | Light damage to three ships | None               | Gunships could not expend due to weather   |
| TP-18  |  | No incident  |                           |                       |                             |                    |  |
| TP-19  | 17May71  | 0700H        | WT298380                  | 75mm, B40             | 2 ships damaged             | 1 killed 1 wounded | USAF gunships and Army LFT expended  |
| PT-19  | through PT-22  | No incidents |                           |                       |                             |                    |  |
| TP-23  | 17Jun71  | 0500H        | 7 miles N of Neak Luong   | B40                   | No damage                   |                    | Army LFT expended  |
| TP-24  | 24Jun71  | 2325H        | 2 miles N of RVN border   | B40                   | 1 tanker hit                | 1 wounded          | USAF gunships and US Navy Sealwolves and Black Ponies expended                         |
| TP-25  |  | No incident  |                           |                       |                             |                    |  |
| TP-26  | 13Jul71  | 0017H        | 19 miles S of Neak Luong  | 57mm                  | Light damage to one ship    | 2 wounded          | Army LFT and US Navy Sealwolves expended - one Army LOH downed<br>USAF TACAIR expended |

# APPENDIX I (Continued)

## DATA ON ENEMY ATTACKS ON THE MEKONG RIVER CONVOYS JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 1971

| CONVOY | DATE    | TIME         | LOCATION                    | TYPE                    | RESULTS                   | CASUALTIES | AIR COVER                                      |
|--------|---------|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------|--|
| TP-27  | and 28  | No incidents |                             |                         |                           |            |  |
| TP-29  | 13Aug71 |              | 12 miles N of<br>RVN border |                         | Light damage              | None       | Army gunships expended                         |
| PT-29  |         | No incidents |                             |                         |                           |            |  |
| PT-30  | 22Aug71 |              | 8 miles N of<br>Neak Luong  | B40, small<br>arms fire | No damage                 | None       |  |
| TP-31  | 3Sep71  |              | 6 miles N of<br>Neak Luong  | B40, 50 cal             | No damage                 | None       | Army LFT expended                              |
| TP-32  | 12Sep71 |              | 11 miles S of<br>Neak Luong | B40                     | Minor damage<br>to 1 ship | 2 wounded  | Army gunships expended                         |
| TP-33  | 24Sep71 |              | 12 miles N of<br>Neak Luong |                         | No damage                 | None       | USAF gunships did not<br>expend due to weather |



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## FOOTNOTES

### CHAPTER I

1. (S) Message, American Embassy Phnom Penh to Secretary of State, Washington, Subj: Mekong Access (U), 071310Z Jan 71. (Cited as: Am Emb 071310Z Jan 71, Msg.)
2. (S) Message, COMUSMACV/CMDR JGS, RVNAF to Cdr 7AF et. al., Subj: Combined Convoy Security Plan (U), 121158Z Jan 71. (Cited as: Basic Plan 121158Z Jan 71.)
3. (S) Basic Plan 121158Z Jan 71.
4. (S) Am Emb 071310Z Jan 71.
5. (S) Basic Plan 121158Z Jan 71.
6. (S) Am Emb 071310Z Jan 71.
7. (S) Basic Plan 121158Z Jan 71.
8. (S) Message, COMUSMACV to JCS, Subj: MNK Relief of VNN of Mekong River Convoys (U), 221040Z Aug 71. (Cited as COMUSMACV 221040Z Aug 71, Msg.)
9. (C) USNAVFORV Monthly Intelligence Summary, May 1971, pp. 63-67. (Cited as USNAVFORV MIS MAY 71.)

### CHAPTER II

10. (S) Ltr, 7AF (INOXC) to 7AF (DOPS), Subj: Area Assessment (U), 9 Jan 1971.
11. (S) Message, USDAO/Phnom Penh to DIA, Subj: Navigation on Mekong (U), 120415Z Jan 71. (Cited as: USDAO 120415Z Jan 71, Msg.)

### CHAPTER III

12. (S) Basic Plan 121158Z Jan 71.
13. (S) Message, 7AF (TACC) to various air units, Subj: Air Operations Cambodia (U), 120800Z Jan 71.
14. (S) Message, CTF 218, Subj: Mekong Convoy Number 7 Air Request (U), 191145Z Feb 71.

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15. (S) Message, COMUSNAVFORV to COMUSMACV, Subj: Employment of USN Gunships in Cambodia (U), 152250Z Jan 71.
16. (S) Message, 7AF (DO) to COMUSMACV, Subj: Air Support for Combined Convoy Security Operations (U), 170930Z Jan 71.
17. (S) Message, 7AF to COMUSMACV, Subj: Employment of U.S. Navy Aircraft (U), 090545Z Feb 71.
18. (S) Message, CTF 218 to 7AF, Subj: Mekong River Air Cover Assets (U), 280200Z Feb 71.
19. (S) Message, 7AF to various air units, Subj: Convoy Escort (U), 171105Z Jan 71. (Cited as: 7AF 171105Z Jan 71, Msg.)
20. (S) Ibid.
21. (S) Message, 7AF to COMUSMACV, Subj: Mekong River Security Operations (U), 131030Z May 71. (Cited as: 7AF 131030Z May 71, Msg.)
22. (S) Message, CTF 218 to 7AF, Subj: Mekong River No Fire Zone (U), 270715Z Mar 71.
23. (S) Message, CTG 116.15/SA CTF 218 to Dep Cmdr THO, Subj: Mekong Convoy No. 17 (U), 021033Z May 71.
24. (S) Message, 7AF to COMUSMACV, Subj: Air Cover for Mekong River Convoys (U), 181130Z Aug 71.
25. (S) Ibid.
26. (S) Message, COMUSMACV to 7AF, Subj: Air Cover for Mekong River Convoys (U), 281052Z Aug 71.
27. (S) Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

28. (C) USNAVFORV MIS May 71, p. 63.
29. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV to Am Emb Phnom Penh, Subj: HGCFR4C (S), 111128Z May 71. Road convoys are discussed in the CHECO Rpt on Air Ops in Cambodia.

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30. (C) USNAVFORV Monthly Intelligence Summary, Feb 1971, pp. 43-44.
31. (S) Message, 7AF to AAG7910, Subj: 7AF Cambodia Intelligence Briefing (U), 020531Z Jul 71.
32. (C) These statistics are based on the NAVFORV Monthly Intelligence Summaries for Jan, Feb, May, and Jul and informal logs maintained in 7AF (DOXS).
33. (C) USNAVFORV Monthly Intelligence Summary, Jul 71, p. 42.
34. (S) Message, CTF 218, Subj: Mekong TP/PT-27 Summary Report (U), 261430Z Jul 71.
35. (S) Report, JGS/RVNAF, Research of Firepower Support to the Inland Water Transport Group of Mekong Special Zone, 2 Aug 71.
36. (S) Message, COMNAVFORV to 7AF, Subj: Convoy Operations (U), 181525Z Jan 71.
37. (C) Message, CTF 218 to 7AF, Subj: Mekong River Convoys (U), 240805Z Apr 71.
38. (S) Report of Tripartite Deputies Study Group for Mekong River Security, 18 Aug 1971, p. 5. (Cited as: Rprt of TDS, 18 Aug 71.)

## CHAPTER V

39. (C) USNAVFORV MIS May 71, p. 63.
40. (S) Message, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, Subj: Protection of River Convoys to Phnom Penh (U), 301139Z Jun 71.
41. (S) Rprt of TDS, 18 Aug 71, p. 6.
42. (S) Message, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, Subj: MNK Relief of GVN on Mekong River Convoys (U), 072313Z Aug 71.
43. (S) Rprt of TDS, 18 Aug 71, p. 1.
44. (S) Message, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, Subj: MNK Relief of VNN of Mekong River Convoys (U), 221040Z Aug 71.

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- 45. (S) Rprt of TDS, 18 Aug 71, p. 6.
- 46. (S) Message, American Embassy Phnom Penh to CINCPAC, Subj: MNK Relief of VNN Mekong River Convoys (U), 141400Z Aug 71.
- 47. (S) Rprt of TDS, 18 Aug 71, p. 7; and  
(S) PACAF XPXS Ltr, Subj: Project CHECO Report "Aerial Protection of Mekong Convoys in Cambodia," 10 Dec 71;  
(S) Plan, Subj: Military Assistance Plan Cambodia, dated 1 Sep 71, p. 18.

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## GLOSSARY

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| ABCCC      | Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center  |
| ARVN       | Army of the Republic of Vietnam  |
| ASPB       | Amphibious Assault Patrol Boat   |
| ATC        | Armored Troop Carrier  |
| BLACK PONY | A heavily armed U.S. Navy OV-10 used on Mekong River convoys for tactical air support. |
| C&C        | Command and Communications helicopter  |
| CCB        | Command and Control Boat   |
| COC        | Convoy Operations Commander for Mekong convoys   |
| COMUSMACV  | Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam                                   |
| CMRSP      | Combined Mekong River Security Plan  |
| CTF 218    | Combined Task Force 218 operated out of the Mekong Delta                               |
| DIA        | Defense Intelligence Agency  |
| DOXF       | Fighter Division, Dir of Ops Plans, Dep Chief of Staff, Operations, Seventh Air Force  |
| DOXS       | Special Operations Div, Dir of Ops Plans, Dep Chief of Staff, Seventh Air Force        |
| FAC        | Forward Air Controller   |
| FANK       | Forces Armees Nationales Khmer (Cambodia)  |
| Frag       | Fragmentary orders   |
| GKR        | Government of the Khmer Republic   |
| GOC        | Government of Cambodia   |
| LCM        | Landing Craft, Mechanized  |
| LFT        | Light Fire Team, consisting of 1 C&C Helo, 2 Cobras and 2 Scouts                       |
| LSSL       | Support Landing Ship, Large  |
| PBR        | Patrol Boat, River   |
| PCF        | Patrol Craft, Fast   |
| POL        | Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants   |
| RVN        | Republic of Vietnam  |
| SEA WOLF   | Heavily armed UH-1 helicopters, used by the U.S. Navy in support of Mekong convoys.    |

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|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| TACC                   | Tactical Air Control Center  |
| TDSG                   | Tripartite Deputies Study Group for Mekong convoys                 |
| TRAN HUNG<br>DAO XVIII | Vietnamese code name assigned to naval operations for the convoys. |
| VNAF                   | Vietnamese Air Force   |
| VNN                    | Vietnamese Navy  |
| ZSM                    | Zone Special Mekong was a Cambodian operation for Mekong Security. |